

An Open Letter to Obama

Mairead Maquire

DEAR PRESIDENT OBAMA,

I found your book "Dreams from My Father" a moving and inspiring story of your own struggle to find your identity and purpose in life. You found it for sure, and today carry the hopes and dreams of so many people in our world. We pray for you and your family. We wish you all good health and happiness. You carry so much responsibility. We hope you will change the policies of USA (both domestic and Foreign) to people centred policies, based on the values and ethics which you try to live out in your life.

Reading your book I was inspired by your involvement (during Sophomore year at University) in the South African anti-apartheid Divestment campaign. Your own words—"I found myself drawn into a larger role –contacting representatives of the African National Congress to speak on campus, drafting strategy, I noticed that people had begun to listen to my opinions", encouraged me to share with you the following opinions, and experiences, of many of the people I met during my most recent visit to Palestine/Israel.

Earlier this month, I attended the 4th Bilin International Conference on Popular Nonviolent Resistance held in Bilin, near Ramallah, in the Israeli occupied Territory of Palestine. Here, all the Palestinian people are asking of you, President Obama, is to listen to their opinions and use your position to help end the racist, apartheid policies of Israel, which continue to cause so much pain and suffering to them. Each week, for the past four years, the villagers (after prayers in the Mosque) walk to the Wall which has annexed much of their land, and cuts them off from their farms and olive groves, and their ability to make a living for their families. As you know, under International Law the Apartheid wall is illegal but Israel continues to ignore International Laws (and some 62 UN resolutions) and annex more land from the Palestinians, all the while demolishing Palestinian homes, building illegal settlements both in East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, and laying Siege to the Gaza strip (1 and a half million people), thus breaking the Geneva Conventions and committing crimes against humanity.

To visit Palestine is to walk with a people whose lives are being made unbearable by Israeli Policies of ethnic cleansing. Each year when I visit I ask myself "how can the Palestinians bear so much suffering and still have hope?" The Philosopher Karl Jung says "Go into your grief for there your soul will grow". Being privileged to walk alongside the Palestinian people, one sees so much soul. Many are materially poor having been made refugees and often pauperised by Israeli occupation and siege, but their dignity, courage, and persistent resistance to injustice is awesome to witness. It reminds me of the magnificence of the human spirit and, I feel humbled to be welcomed as a friend of the people of Bilin, Ramallah, Gaza, and Palestine. I wish that you President Obama would go and walk with them as you walked in spirit with the people of South Africa in their great and inspirational anti-apartheid movement.

Walking every week in the peaceful protest to the Apartheid wall, are Israeli activists and Internationals. It takes great courage to come from Israel to the occupied territories and oppose your own Government's Policies and I pay

tribute to the Israeli peace activists who continue to do so, often at the cost of punishment by the Israeli Government. Yet, they come, and here is the hope that not all Israelis support their Government's racist and apartheid policies of siege, occupation and militarization of both Israel and Palestinian villages and towns. I also pay tribute to the Inter-nationals who put their lives daily on the line to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians. Last month in the Village of Nilin, one young man from your own country of America, Tristan Anderson, was targeted by Israeli soldiers, and hit in the head with a gas canister. He is currently in intensive care, and we all hope he will recover.

At the Bilin Conference an Israeli asked me "how can we touch the hearts of the Israeli people so they can change their Government's policies?" I believe there is so much fear amongst the Israelis of ethnic annihilation but this fear can be dissolved by the politics of the heart. Israel should not be afraid of the Palestinians or Arab world. They are not the enemy and this can be borne witness to by the Israelis who come to stay in this village and who are taken care of, with such love, by the Bilin villagers. The Israeli people must make friends with the Palestinians and indeed the whole Arab world, and take seriously the peace agreement offered by the Arab countries. There will never be a military or armed struggle solution to the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict, as it is a political problem with a political solution. What is lacking is a real political will, on behalf of the Israeli Government, to enter seriously into all inclusive unconditional talks.

During the peaceful protest to the wall, we were assaulted by the Israeli soldiers with teargas, and rubber bullets. Many of us were overcome with the teargas and others seriously hurt with steel tipped rubber bullets. On 17th April, 2009, at this wall, one of the protesters, Bassem Abu-Rahma, was hit in the chest with a teargas metal container and killed. He was a young man from the village much loved by all and his death caused great pain and anger particularly amongst his peer group. I marvelled at the skill of the Village Leaders and Muslim women, who kept reminding the young men that they must keep their protest peaceful, but the atmosphere felt like a pressure cooker with the lid about to blow. How much longer must this injustice to Palestinian people be allowed to continue unchallenged by your administration? If you do not insist upon Israel Upholding its International responsibility immediately, this anger will grow and the daily humiliation of Palestine, by Israeli injustice and soldiers will push more people towards retaliatory violence. (As one of our great Irish poets WB Yeats wrote "too long a sacrifice makes a stone of the heart").

I appeal to you President Obama, to change USA Policies and stop supporting through military aid, etc, Israeli occupation of Palestine, and to move immediately to help lift the siege of Gaza and say to Israel "enough is enough".

In the meantime, I support the Bilin committee's strategy of BDS in an attempt to get their freedom and rights. You, as a supporter and activist for South Africa's BDS campaign know it succeeded in ending Apartheid as Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Tutu often reminds us. Such a strategy can work for Palestine too. Some South Africans Anti-Apartheid leaders when visiting Israel have said it is much worse than the days of Apartheid in their country. However, I believe President Obama, you can do so much more than those of

us who Support the BDS campaign. You can bring your experience in your own struggle for peace and freedom to help solve this problem.

[Mairead Maquire won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976]

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